

THE LOVE OF PHILIP ASH.

BY MRS. DENISON.

"If a man's brought up right," said Deacon Rafe, "under the prayers of a good pious mother, I tell ye he's got to wrastle like all nater, afore he takes evil ways on him. What's done, has got to be ondid, and at the beginnin' it's mighty hard work to go wrong, though it's like goin' down a hill—after the fust few steps you have got to run. It don't take so long a pullin' down as it does a buildin' up."

Old Deacon Rafe, or Uncle Rafe, as everybody called him, stood on the broad hearth-stone, as he delivered himself of this speech, holding his hat in his hand. A candle burned on the shelf, which Susan, the daughter of Deacon Pelt, had lighted to show her Uncle Rafe the way through the long, dark entry. It was early October, but the day had been cold, and the ruddy firelight flickered, and flashed, and leaped out ruddily, now revealing the full smooth brow of the girl, anon the gleam of a soft gray eye, dark with thought, and again the fine curve of the red lips that were lightly pressed together, as she stood looking straight before her, seeming to see through the thin, angular frame of the deacon—through the square of darkness caused by the open door.

Not far from the old fireplace stood a table, square and solid, shining in the warmth and honesty of real mahogany, a piece of furniture that the good deacon was wont to boast was nearly a hundred years old, and had been in the family for three generations. The kerosene lamp upon it, a very small one, sent a luminous circle of light from under the painted shade; the light fell upon a thick, old-fashioned volume, with clasps, but the face that bent above it, a man's face, bronzed and handsome, wore an expression that was almost heart-breaking to look upon, when as now his eyes sought the lettered page; but his soul seemed to be far, far away, intent upon some memory, perhaps, that the old man's speech had awakened in his mind.

This speech had reference to some matter of discipline in the church over which these two men held the rod of authority, for Deacon Rafe and Deacon Pelt were the two strong pillars of the spiritual Zion on Milton Hill. Both were powerful men in their way, both were old and tried citizens and Christians, and both had more than a sufficiency of this world's goods. The case about which they had been talking was a sad one—a woman—a wife and a mother had gone astray, and she was to be sent out of the fold that had saved and sheltered her, lest she bring disgrace upon the church.

"Well, good-evenin', brother!" said Uncle Rafe, holding out a wrinkled hand all covered with thick blue-gray veins. "I'm very sorry this thing has happened, but as matters stand we must act upon 't immediately, and not give

the world a chance to talk. Good-night, Susy, my dear; oh, you 're goin' to light me out; that is very kind of you. I s'pose I ought to know the way, but my sight is growing poor, I believe, and I ain't as steady on my feet as I used to be."

Susy went with the old man as far as the outside door, stood there a moment holding the candle back and gazing out into the bright moonlight. How beautiful, how saintly still the scene was! The green before the door seemed bleached to a silver whiteness, the trees were tipped with a clear radiance, that glorified the night; the great vault above hung like a pale curtain, faintly studded with stars, outshone by the greater luminary. Through the branches the mysterious voices of night whispered, and underneath, at gnarled roots, and below tufted moss and odorous grasses, the happy insect world held its musical carnival. Susy looked over all this with a yearning glance that yet wore the pensive shades of some recent sorrow. The girl's nature had apparently been roused by some sudden shock from the apathy of careless youth. Far and near Susy had always been quoted as "that thoughtless creature," and the old adage, "a deacon's daughter," had been again and again applied to her, but within the past six months, I might as well add since Philip Ash had come to live with them, she had changed so perceptibly that more than one gossip wagged her tongue over the fact.

At last some noise within recalled the girl from her dream. With a deep sigh she closed the door, lingeringly, as if loth even in her abstraction to shut out the beautiful picture, and with slow steps she wended her way back into the old-fashioned kitchen.

Since she had left not a leaf had been turned by the student; the yellow light streamed over the same page, on his hand, white and well-shaped; and the face, still wrapped in shadow, held the same gloom. He did not look up as the girl brushed past him, breathing quick, but kept his eyelids straight and still.

Susy went to the fire, snuffed out her candle, and, with a mute woe in her face, sank down heavily. Mrs. Pelt, just putting the finishing touches to a stocking of coarse blue yarn, gave her girl a side look under half-shut lids, and pursed up her mouth a little as she drew the last needle out.

"John's bought that colt, Susy," said the gray-haired, pink-cheeked little woman, who, though nearing sixty, still retained the bloom of her youth.

"Has he?" and the voice was very unlike the cheerful tones of the girl.

"Yes, and 'twasn't for Dorcas, neither, I'm a thinking. Dorcas has been at him for a long time, but I heerd him say that if he got her, he shouldn't give her to anybody in the family. He came out of meetin' last Sunday with Jared

Pinkham's cousin. She's from the city, and is full of fashionable ways and notions. I guess John might do better than that; I don't know. He's smart, anyway, and owns one of the best farms in the country." Then, after a little pause and one or two stealthy side glances at the girl's face, she added, "Belindy says he took you home from the quiltin', t'other night."

Susy's face grew flame red. "He did! I did not want him; but he did," she said, in low, half-smothered tones. "I don't care about it; I don't want to talk about it," she added, nervously, and touched the heavy burning log with her foot.

"Shoes cost something, Susy," said her careful mother, startled out of her previous train of thought by the thousands of stars that snapped and shot up and out like the scintillations of spent rockets. "It's time for honest folks to be a-bed, I reckon," she went on, putting her needles away. "Biah'll come in and see to covering the coals."

"Yes, mother, I'll go in a little while," said Susan, lifting herself wearily; "there—there's something I want to do; it won't take me but a minute, and then I'll go."

"Well, good-night, dear;" and the woman bent forward and kissed the cheek of her woman daughter—the only child left to her of seven. Very tender was the touch of hand and lip, and the mother turned away with a moan in her heart. The child of her old age was in trouble, and she knew not how to comfort her.

The silence grew oppressive when the door had closed, and the lingering echo of footsteps quite died away. Susy sat motionless, her hands dropping at her side, one over the other, her head drooping, her eyelids shut close to keep back scalding tears. All the evening a struggle had been going on within her. It was a struggle that a year ago would have culminated in an obstinate and prideful silence, and her heart, like a caged bird, might have beat itself to death against the cruel bars of her determination, for pride and stubbornness had been her besetting sins. Susy had been the darling of two old hearts, and had come very near being ruined through their constant indulgence. But, though the child of an almost idolatrous love, she was also the child of prayer. Old Deacon Pelt, to use his own words, had "wrestled mortally for his one ewe lamb, that she might be brought into the kingdom." His prayer had been answered, for Susy had bowed that fair head in sincere penitence, had been admitted into the visible fold of the Good Shepherd. So, though it was a hard matter for her to overcome her natural worldliness, other motives underlaid her purposes—a supreme power guided her thoughts into right channels, and where once she would have died sooner than confess herself in the wrong, she now, though it almost tore soul from body, put self out of sight, and

elevated her moral nature by penitence and confession.

After awhile she lifted her head slowly, and stole a glance at Philip Ash. Would he never move? She felt instinctively that he was not reading, that if there were burning thoughts beneath the pressure of his hand, under the cold, unmoving glare of his eyes, they kindled no answering fire in his bosom. Should she go to him and confess? She shivered at the thought, and he sitting so still and passionless. If he would but move, but turn and look at her, though the look might chide. Her heart beat with such fierce, strong strokes that it seemed to her they must be audible to him. Could she stifle the terror with which his silent presence filled her heart, and go to him, and say forgive?

Just then the great log broke with a sound like an explosion. Philip Ash did turn at that, but Susy was busy doing battle with the flaming coals that had fallen out upon the hearth to the very verge, where the new rag carpet enlivened the sombre red of the well-worn flag stones. When she lifted herself breathless and flushed, Philip still sat in the same statue-like attitude.

Whizzing and whirring the old corner clock struck eleven. Startled at the sound, Susy decided to retire, but first she would put her resolve in execution. With a trembling hand, a crimson face, and glittering eyes, she moved unsteadily to the table. He might have felt her approach; but if he did, he gave no sign.

"There must be something cruel in his nature," Susy thought, bitterly, and then she stopped beside him. "Philip!"

At the sound of her voice he looked up at her, oh! so cold and stern.

"I wounded your feelings last night, Philip. It was thoughtlessly done, and—I am sorry." She gave a little gasp, but bravely kept the tears down.

"So am I;" voice and manner were alike cold.

"O Philip! I want you to forgive me." There was another gasp more like a sob.

"I dare not deny your forgiveness."

And still through the calm voice ran a threat of condemnation that fell lead-like on the sensitive young heart beside him. She stood there for a moment in the shadow; pressing her dry lips together, wringing her slender hands, moaning in her inmost soul that all was over, this precious love life was over. She should bury it, and go mourning all through the dreary days of her existence. "O Philip! is that all?" at last burst like a heavy sob from her overburdened bosom.

"What more would you have?" he asked, coldly.

"One word that would give me assurance that I was pleading to a human being," she said, passionately; "one look that has at least

the gentleness of friendship. You cannot know how hard it has been for me to conquer myself—and—I hoped at least you would show—a little pity”—her voice choked, her cheeks became crimson, and her hands trembled, though they were locked like iron.

Philip never looked up; he dared not. One glance might have overcome his stern resolve, and softened the anguish at his heart. He gloried in his own martyrdom, perhaps, for he had suffered more than this proud girl at his side. She could not know how much nor how long. “I said I had forgiven you, Susy. I can say nothing more. Years ago I made a vow that if the woman I had loved should trifle with me in the most ordinary acceptance of that term, I might forgive, but never should consider her as holding any more intimate relation thereafter than that of an ordinary friend. This decision was forced upon me by circumstances of the most painful character. I cannot speak of them now—I”—he paused, looked up at the empty space beside him. The girl had vanished like a spirit; an angry light in her eye, her lip curved nevertheless to the grieved outlines of bitter agony, her heart aching as in her young, pleasant life it had never ached before.

“Oh, why did he come here—why?” she cried, in a voice of anguish, as she threw herself down upon her bed when she had reached her own room. “Did God send him here to make me suffer because I had resolved to live a truer and better life? Is this the cross that I must bear? Are these the thorns that are to bruise and wound me, because I choose the narrow road? Is this what I receive for trying to live the life of a Christian? I cannot bear it, I cannot! What shall I do? Who will help me? If I could only have told him what led me to do as I did—if he had not been so cold, so cruel, so wicked! He never loved me, he has tired of my devotion; he never loved me if he can give me up for that. And yet he bore with me that night. Three times he suffered himself to be slighted, almost insulted, and even at the last, if I had let him come home with me, as was his right, all might have been well. Now I have lost him forever, oh! forever.”

She lifted herself and moved for a moment hurriedly to and fro. The words “forever and forever” seemed to sound in her brain. She raised the window sash higher, and leaned out with a yearning that the calm and silence of the soft summer night might infuse itself into her weary life, for, being young and ardent, and a very novice in sorrow, she felt some way as if her years had been many and full of trouble. The world receded; the gleam of white grave-stones in the little churchyard, now lying all alight under the moonbeams, was a grateful sight to her, and she felt that it would be pleasant to lie down under the green turf, and know

no more of this cruel world and the hearts that were so cold and untrue. As she looked with dry, burning eyes upon the lovely night, she saw some one coming slowly past the window—the figure of a man. It stopped at the gate, leaned wearily upon it, and looked long and wistfully towards the house. Susy could see the slouched hat; she even fancied that undersomewhat seedy habiliments the stranger carried the look and manner of a gentleman. The moonlight fell full upon him, and, but for the peculiar head-gear, she could have seen his features distinctly. She had drawn back from the window as he stopped, and surprise and curiosity overcame for the moment her deeper emotions. Presently the man lifted the latch cautiously, and came up the path that led to the front door. Susy's window was directly over it. She heard three or four quick raps, and then a moment after old Biah's shuffling steps across the hall. The man spoke low, but audibly. His voice thrilled her, she could not have told why. He was a stranger, and had lost his way, very weary, willing to pay for a night's lodging, and he seemed very grateful when, after a somewhat tedious cross-questioning, Biah consented to let him share his own bed.

Meantime Philip Ash had closed his book, and, as the stranger's knock sounded at the door, he had opened a window that led to a small side porch, and quietly stepped out. For a moment he stood gazing straight before him on the glory of sky and forest; then he moved down the garden till he came to the banks of a little stream that ran through the farm, terminating some half a mile away in the wider river and pretty falls that made the village picturesque. Campsie mill, for which he was the agent, stood in full view; its many windows illuminated, as with silver tapers, by the mild lustre of the moonlight. Beneath the water glittered a stream which he might have leaped with safety, but deep and rapid at times for all that. Philip paused here with folded arms, and mused half-aloud.

“Another dream,” he murmured, bitterly. “Another temple fallen at my feet in ruins. God help me, for I love the girl as I never loved any woman before. And I built my hopes upon her because I thought a Christian would be tender, and loving, and true. More fool I! They are all alike—worldly or religious, saints or sinners—they must play cat-like with the very sinews of men's hearts, and wreck them utterly for the pleasurings of their vanity. And I had hoped so much from a union with her; she seemed so to fill my heart, that has been hungering and thirsting for an honest love for years. Life has shut down before me in cruel darkness; its light has gone utterly and forever. I shall never love again.”

Did nothing whisper to him that there was something noble in this woman's nature, since

she had brought herself to ask for forgiveness, humbled a heart that was naturally proud, and stubborn, and unrelenting? Did not the fair young face, all flushed as he felt it was, and more beautiful for its clouding, plead with him? Yes, these had their influence, but the poison-point of an arrow that had lodged in his soul years before, rankled there still, and fevered his blood and steeled his heart.

"One woman has deceived me, no other shall," he muttered, bitterly, and wended his way back to the house, gaining entrance by his night-key; for "Biah" had locked the window and the door, and the stranger was long ago sound asleep, under the protecting wing of the good old man-servant.

Morning broke in all the glory of autumn, and found Susy in a better frame of mind, though still quite unhappy. "If religion is good for anything," she said, like a philosopher, or rather like a Christian, "it will carry me through this sorrow. At all events, I shall not beg for his love;" and then, shining through the clouds of her darkness for a moment, all manner of golden visions of possible relentings and unforeseen chances brightened the shadows, and set the bow of hope over the small world of her regrets and longings, and for a brief time she was almost cheered again. So she went down stairs and quietly assisted in getting breakfast, looking so busy and pretty in her neat dress of gingham, protected by the apron of spotless white, that her mother, and even old Biah gazed at her with admiring eyes.

"Biah had a man sleep with him last night," said Mrs. Pelt, turning the delicate rice-cakes she had prepared. "Seems quite the gentleman, too, Biah says. Of course we wouldn't let him go away without breakfast."

He was there when Susy carried in the tea (Philip Ash had not come down yet; he seldom came down till the family were well seated at table). Susy was startled when she saw him; he was older than Philip, but there was an unmistakable likeness between the two; who could he be? He looked haggard and worn, and like a man whose shoulders had long been wearily bent under some crushing affliction.

Presently they drew up to the well-spread table; the deacon's sonorous voice sounded in thanksgiving, the pleasant clinking of cups and saucers succeeded, when the door opened, and Philip Ash entered, stood there like a man struck into stone, his eyes dilated, his lips parted. The strange guest, startled by the silence that followed, turned; the eyes of the two met. Never was consternation more strongly painted on a human countenance than on that of the man who had chanced among them. An expression of deadly terror succeeded; he turned pale to the roots of his hair, and stammered out, in a hoarse voice, "You—Philip?"

Philip Ash said nothing. If his look conveyed a menace, his lips had not the power to

utter it. He turned slowly, closed the door, and they could hear him afterward, pacing the floor overhead.

"Nothing, thanks; I can eat no breakfast, now. That man, God help me, is my brother! How can I find his room? I *must* see him. I have done him deadly wrong."

The words seemed to be forced from him; he arose from the table, went over to the nail on which his hat hung, and turned to the door through which Philip had disappeared. The deacon had also arisen. "Young man, let there be no violence," he said, in his firm, even tones.

"God forbid!" was the answer; "there will be none, assuredly on *my* part;" and he was gone.

"Deacon, hadn't Biah better stand on the stairs? I'm mortally afraid they'll come to blows. Philip's face has almost given me a chill, it was so awful. What can be the matter between them? Dear me, to think of brothers being enemies." Susy was a little frightened. Instinctively she took sides with Philip; whatever it was, that man with the fierce eyes and fiercer moustache was the wrong; she settled that in her mind.

At first there was silence overhead, when the man seemed to have entered, and then burst forth a storm of language, surging above all other sounds. Then there was a lull again, and presently the stranger came down, still white and terror-stricken, looking about him, as if he saw for the first time the faces that were gathered there.

"I—must go," he said. "Many thanks for your kindness, though if I had known," he added, in a lower voice, "whom this house contained, I would have walked a thousand miles rather than meet him."

"Well, if that isn't curious!" exclaimed Mrs. Pelt, watching the stranger as he went with rapid strides away from the house, "what can it mean? Gracious mercy!"

The exclamation (such were seldom heard in Deacon Pelt's house) was called forth by the sudden noise overhead—the fall of a heavy body. Susy turned white; Biah and the deacon hurried up the stairs; Susy and her mother stood trembling below, when the deacon called out:—

"Wife, there's trouble here; this youngster has fainted, or maybe"—

Susy and her mother flew to the deacon's side. Philip lay stretched upon the floor like one quite dead, and the deacon was pouring water over his face.

"Biah, you'd better go for the doctor," he said, as all remedies seemed to fail. "Susy, do not cry, child; the wheels of life ain't stopped forever, I reckon, though it looks mighty like it."

Together the deacon and his wife placed the helpless body on the bed. Susy went below,

wringing her hands in helpless agony, and (she could do nothing now) stood at the gate to watch for the approach of the doctor. She had never known before the strength of her love. Without recompense or hope of reward, it seemed to her that she could give her life for him; and oh! how fervently she prayed that God would not punish her by taking him away.

Three long weeks of fever succeeded. The life they watched, under the roof of the deacon's farm-house, hung for days upon a thread. Susy shared with her mother in nursing him. If they forbade her, and hinted at her pallor, she wept, implored, and insisted, until they could not refuse. The old deacon shook his head at the change in his hitherto dutiful child, and for the first time seeing how matters stood, looked forward with new anxiety to the result. The doctor came and went without speaking, until, one day, he took Susy's hand, as he said, "My young friend, your good nursing has saved his life;" and, as a matter of course, Susy went by herself and wept as if her heart would break—but they were happy tears.

Very faint, wan, and weak he was, as he lay there past the verge of danger, and Susy sat watching him, with a new light in her beautiful eyes. It seemed to her that now that God had spared him, she had nothing more to ask. One morning he called her to him.

"Susy, it has preyed upon me—the memory of my cruel coldness that night. Now, lying here, helpless, brought up from death's door, as the doctor assures me, by your unwearying care, I ask you to forgive me. Will you, Susy?"

"Oh, no, no; don't ask me that," sobbed Susy. "I was in the wrong; oh, God is so good to give you back"—

"To you, Susy? Say it, for I feel that heart and soul I am yours, my darling." His voice lingered over the love-word, and both were silent for some moments. "And now, dear, I will tell you about *him*—the brother whom I so strangely met and parted from. You will know, then, what has darkened my life, and made it for nearly ten years, a burden and a bitterness to me. My brother possessed a strange and jealous nature. He was older than myself, and I being ambitious and fond of study, outstripped him at school, and gained the warmer approbation of my father. He never forgave me for that. As we grew older, I tried to conciliate him, but he never behaved towards me as a brother should. When I was twenty I was engaged to be married to a ward of my father's, a lovely girl, seemingly innocent and singularly fascinating. I need not tell you that I thought I loved her, purely and fervently; that I felt, in all the world there was nothing so dear and beautiful. It was my first hallucination; I know now that it could not have been such love as manhood, matured and purified through trial, experiences. The evening-draw

near. On the eventful morning of the day, whose close was to make me the happiest of mortals, I drove over to the house of my bride-elect. Even then she met me, all smiles and graciousness. That night there was no bride. A note, hurriedly written, given to me in the presence of a hundred expectant guests—in the midst of perfumes, and flowers, and beauty, informed me that the "woman at whose feet I had poured all the treasures of my heart, had gone away with my brother."

A half-articulate cry escaped the pale lips of the listener. To her this story seemed almost too horrible for belief.

"I was very calm. I believed nobody saw that I suffered. Unforeseen circumstances, I said, had prevented the wedding, but the guests must nevertheless enjoy themselves. The people with whom this girl had been stopping were furious, but I was calm. I felt as if my heart had turned to stone, and would never love again. Nor did it, darling, till your sweet face stirred its pulses. I will say nothing of all my life between that time and this. I put no faith in woman; for years I scarcely spoke to one. My brother had gone abroad. From that night till the morning I met him, I had not seen him or heard from him. Well, God's wheels grind slowly, but surely the retribution comes. My brother married her, but she has served him worse than she treated me; ignored the sacred ties that bound her, forgetting her babes, gone off with one dead to all morality, and God alone knows in what part of the world, abused and forsaken, she suffers to-day. And now you know why I seemed so unkind that night. The old trouble was revived by the conversation between your father and Deacon Rafe—the old wound torn open afresh. I feared that you, so young, pure, and good as you seemed, had still that strange leaven of deception in your nature; that you, too, could taunt, and madden, and"—

A soft hand was on his lips. "Alice Hunt told me that you were trifling with me, that you had trifled with her, that she had heard you were already a husband, and my mind was poisoned, Philip. But, after a little reflection, I believed she had told me nothing that was true. I hated myself for what I said, for what I did. O Philip! you shall never think, never have cause to think unworthily of me again. I have been only half-hearted in everything, and yet God has been so good to me."

She broke down, crying again, and Philip, putting his arm about her, drew her wet cheek closer to his lips.

There was a slight rustling at the door.

"Well, deacon," said Mrs. Pelt, a moment after, taking up her knitting, "I see now what's been the matter with our Susy. I guess after this you and I must be contented with each other."

There was a smile on her lips, but under her

glasses the tears could be seen welling up. The deacon made no reply, but he understood her, and said softly to himself, as the sweet face of his child came before him :—

“God bless her !” While the mother’s heart echoed :—

“God bless them both !”

